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The US-led world order is breaking—here's what history tells us may come next



The US is undermining the very order it built, and the recent Shanghai Cooperation Organization summit shows how China is seizing the moment to offer an alternative.

Terrence Mullan writes that historical patterns indicate that the result may not be a new global system, but a more independent world of shifting power and contested rules.

Flanked by more than two dozen leaders around the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) summit earlier this month, Chinese President Xi Jinping signaled the emergence of an alternative to the US-led order.

An important summit – without the US

The SCO summit and accompanying Beijing military parade not only marked **the first ever gathering** of leaders from Beijing, Moscow, Pyongyang, and Tehran, but the first time in seven years that Indian President Narendra Modi has visited China. Geopolitics is often about voting with your feet, and, in this instance, a litany of rising—although mostly authoritarian—powers gathered to object to the US-led order.

The timing was no accident. The Trump administration has been busy tearing away at the system America once built—picking fights with allies, abandoning institutions, and acting outside the rules it once defended.

Xi used the SCO summit to cast China as a pillar of global governance and stability. He **called for** “a clear stand against hegemonism and power politics,” appealed for “true multilateralism,” and **launched** a new Global Governance Initiative. Whether or not the SCO can overcome **its internal divisions**, the symbolism is striking: the world may be witnessing a turning point in the global order.

As the US-led order falters, an alternative is being built

Since World War II, the United States and other powers constructed an order of rules and institutions that shaped relations between nations. While imperfect, it offered both restraints and benefits that sustained its legitimacy.

Orders rarely collapse in a single moment. They only change after eroding gradually, often undermined by the very powers that once upheld them. While many experts have for years alleged that the order is changing, ongoing events mark a significant development. The SCO summit signals how calls for an alternative order are gaining momentum, and recent US actions illustrate how quickly the foundations are weakening.

In April, the Trump administration **signaled its willingness** to recognize parts of Ukraine as Russian territory—reversing decades of policy against rewarding aggression. Recent US-Russia talks in Alaska may have also brought back a system where powerful states act without consulting those most affected.

In June, the United States **struck** Iranian nuclear facilities without allied coordination, UN backing, or legal justification. Whether you disagree with previous US interventions or not, the rules-based order mattered, and its principles were taken **into strategic calculations**. The now three “**flagrantly unlawful**” US military strikes on small boats in the international waters of the Caribbean this month further heightens this trend.



Prime Minister's Office (GODL-India), GODL-India, via Wikimedia Commons

The Trump administration's use of the US economy as a blunt weapon undermines existing treaties, the World Trade Organization, and future **investments** in the United States. Meanwhile, US support for Israel's war, despite the deepening humanitarian crisis in Gaza, further undermines the Western claim to defend international law.

How the US is undermining the global order it has led

Orders endure only when they **restrain power and deliver benefits**. By withdrawing aid, launching trade wars, blocking institutions, and disregarding rules, the US is eroding both. The US-led reality of the current order is becoming less acceptable. Like **past hegemony**, such as the British empire, the United States risks overreaching abroad just as its revenues shrink at home; a combination that imperils war overseas and instability at home.

Given all this, how can the rest of the world stand by and accept the rules when a giant gap is emerging in the legitimacy of the order and its practice? As the rest of the world gains more influence and economic power, should they not have more of a say in what the rules should be?

As Washington chips away at the system, China is filling the vacuum, letting aggressive US actions overshadow its, at times, **more subtle** undermining of the current order. Beijing **removes tariffs** on African imports while Washington piles them on. It **expands** Belt and Road projects while the US slashes aid. For many states, the appeal is not necessarily China's vision, but the chance to shape rules in a system that better reflects today's distribution of power.

History shows that **every hegemon** eventually provokes resistance. Whether the US is too integrated in the global economy and collective security alliances to avoid such push back is unknown but is dangerous to test. The fact that US security guarantees and partnerships have faced increasing scrutiny in **Europe, the Middle East, and Asia** should be a worrying trend. The risk now is that the United States, in trying to preserve dominance, **accelerates its decline**—and with it, the order it created.

From great powers to more independent states?

In this sense, Trump could be exactly what most of the world seeks: an opportunity to change the order. However, order changes are often accompanied by tumultuous, deadly, and costly gaps. They usually only occur around conflict and collapse.

We are likely entering a period when the order framework shifts from one dominant country toward more independent states. As order historian **Adam Watson argued**, international systems tend to swing like a pendulum—hegemony eventually gives way to pressure for greater autonomy, just as loose independence often pushes states toward integration. We are experiencing the former.

If this is the case, the world would see the rise of ideas and behavior reflecting sovereignty, non-intervention, isolationism, and coalitions that reject the idea of “great powers”. This would be accompanied by a decline of human rights, aid, and active management of the international system. However, things will likely get worse before they get better. While transitioning to a new order, some powers—less impeded by rules—could show less restraint than they have over the past eighty years.

What ultimately comes next may not be a new universal order but something messier: a world less integrated, more regional, and more contested. Trump's actions and the SCO summit suggest that shift is no longer hypothetical, it's already begun.

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Terrence Mullan is a MPhil/PhD candidate in the Department of International Relations at LSE. His research focuses on how shifts in climate have impacted international order change. He was previously associate director of the Council of Councils at the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR), where he managed an international initiative that connected twenty-seven major policy institutes from twenty-four countries in a dialogue on issues of geopolitics and multilateral cooperation.

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